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AUTHOR Suddle, Julie K.

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ABSTRACT

Catholic schools in the United States are engaged in a struggle to balance mission and market concerns. This paper presents a survey that explores the reasons why predominantly non-Catholic parents chose to send their children to a Catholic elementary school. The paper also examines the Catholic school's responsiveness to market forces as it attempts to preserve its mission. Dayton (Ohio) Catholic Elementary (DCE) is bordered on two sides by low-income neighborhoods. DCE faced multiple obstacles in the past two decades of changing religious make-up of the student body, changing racial mix, changing demographics of the neighborhood, and decreasing economic resources. Enrollment is 100 percent African American, almost 90 percent of whom are from non-Catholic families. Data were gathered through observation, formal and informal interviews, review of school documents, and a survey of parents. The survey elicited 69 responses, a 26 percent response rate. The findings show that Dayton Catholic Elementary is an example of a school that is distinctive without being exclusive. Parents' reasons for enrolling their children at DCE revolved around what they perceived to be the school's distinctive features: smaller class sizes, teacher interest in students, an emphasis on academic standards, discipline and order, attention to values, and the sense of community. The availability of tuition aid did not appear to be a motivating factor. In addition, the consistency between the school's mission and everyday classroom practice projected a powerful message to the school community. As urban Catholic elementary schools grapple with the market and mission of their schools, they must begin to pass over the "traditional rim." DCE realized its traditional mission by being sensitive to a new market; the school's responsiveness to family needs was a cornerstone of its distinctiveness. (LMO)

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Julie K. Biddle, Ph.D.
University of Dayton
School of Education
300 College Park
Dayton, OH 45469-0510

(937) 229-4517
biddlej@keiko.udayton.edu

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Peering Over the Traditional Rim
A Story from Dayton Catholic Elementary

Catholic schools in the United States are engaged in a struggle to balance mission and market concerns. Catholic schools, particularly urban Catholic schools, are wrestling with ways to remain open without compromising their Catholic identity (Archer, 1997). In Catholic Schools and the Common Good, Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) clearly articulate the power that ideology and market concerns have over most contemporary Catholic school operations (p. 311). Grace (1996) further asserts, "contemporary conditions in America are beginning to demonstrate that market forces, market values and the inexorable circumstances for institutional survival and financial solvency are threatening the historical mission and values of Catholic schooling" (p. 84). The capricious balance between market and mission of one urban Catholic elementary school is a central interest of the inquiry reported here.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to share results of a parent survey exploring the reasons predominantly non-Catholic parents choose to send their children to a Catholic elementary school. Second, to examine the Catholic school's responsiveness to market forces as it attempts to preserve its mission. The article establishes the theoretical and historical context for the study, continues with an explanation about research methodology and concludes with a discussion of implications

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for other urban Catholic schools.

Theoretical Context

In 1982, Cibulka, O'Brien, and Zewe conducted the first major empirical study on inner-city elementary schools. Virtually all the schools that participated in their study were Catholic schools. They too explored why low-income minority parents chose private schools and what problems these schools faced. Cibulka and his colleagues found that these schools exercised only limited selectivity in their admissions. The families who used these schools were often larger, poorer, and more likely to be headed by a single parent. The parents were slightly better educated than was the average low-income minority parent and more than half of them were not Catholic. The authors found that parents selected these schools because they sought the best education for their children. Even though religious training was valued, it was not the compelling reason why parents enrolled their children in these schools. Parents perceived that these schools offered their children a quality education and were more responsive to their needs than were the public schools (p. 81).

Likewise, several other studies document the contribution of Catholic schools to the students of the inner city, particularly minority students. These studies show that children in inner-city Catholic schools typically have responsive parents who seek sound educational placements for their children in schools that reinforce the values they

stress at home (see Convey, 1992). As detailed later, the findings of this study reflect similar parental values and choices.

Historical Context

Dayton Catholic Elementary (DCE), a consolidated school since 1974, serves the educational needs of three parishes. Located in Northwest Dayton, Ohio, it is bordered on two sides by low income, multi-family housing and low-middle class single family dwellings on the other two sides. Within a mile of the school is an economically distressed retail area.

The school is housed in the former Assumption Parish School. DCE came into existence nearly twenty years ago when St. James Parish closed its doors and joined the existing St. Agnes and Assumption School. Currently, less than twenty percent of the student body is churched at one of the three parishes. When the school was consolidated it held a contest to choose a new name. Students suggested possible names and ended up voting for "Dayton Catholic."

The school serves children in kindergarten through the eighth grade. There is one class per grade; other than the kindergarten and first grade, which have two adults in the classroom, there is one teacher per grade. Additional faculty include science, physical education, and music teachers. The classroom teachers are responsible for their own art instruction. A bookmobile makes regular stops at the school and speech and Title I services are available on site.

Dayton Catholic has faced multiple obstacles in the past two decades: changing religious make-up of the student body, changing racial mix, changing demographics of the neighborhood, and decreasing economic resources. At this writing, enrollment is 100% African American and nearly 90% non-Catholic. Not unlike the individuals in Cibulka's study, the average age in DCE's neighborhood is twenty-two; the average family income is $13,000; and the majority of the families are headed by a single female with no spouse. The current tuition of approximately $2,250 is a luxury not easily attained by most students living in the immediate school neighborhood. The majority of Dayton Catholic students qualify for free or reduced lunch and receive partial or full tuition assistance.

A typical demographic factor that has affected the enrollment of many Catholic schools is the migration of the Catholic population from areas that had a large number of Catholic schools to areas that often have few or no Catholic schools. The most common migration was from parishes in urban areas to suburban parishes (Convey, 1992). This was the situation at Dayton Catholic. In 1995, the school found itself in serious financial trouble. If Dayton Catholic Elementary was to remain open action had to be taken to increase enrollment.

After months of discussions, a plan was devised. During the summer months, teachers went door to door canvassing the immediate school neighborhood to recruit new students. As a result of the teachers'

concerted efforts enrollment increased from 160 students in 1994-95 to 250 students in 1995-96 (maximum enrollment is 270).

As noted before, schools like Dayton Catholic have become more appealing and accessible to non-Catholics resulting in a dramatic increase in the enrollment of non-Catholic students. The non-Catholic population is generally drawn to Catholic schools because of their reputation for academic excellence, emphasis on values, and good discipline. These factors, coupled with personal experience in private schools prompted me to ask several questions, one of which is a focus of this article: Why do non-Catholic, African-American parents choose to send their children to Dayton Catholic Elementary School?

Methodology

My inquiry is a longitudinal study about a specific urban elementary Catholic school. This article is a preliminary reporting of data collected over the past ten months focusing on the parent survey. What is shared here is just the edge of understanding the myriad stories of Dayton Catholic Elementary.

Qualitative methods, primarily participant observation, observations, informal and formal interviews, and school documents provide the empirical materials collected. I consistently use a field note journal to chronicle my observations, thoughts, perceptions, and questions.

Observations at DCE began in the spring of 1996. I attended summer faculty meetings which afforded the opportunity to get acquainted with the faculty in an informal setting (these meetings were held at the principal's home). At the beginning of the 1996-97 school year, I read student folders, documented demographic data, and began regular classroom observations. In the intervening months I have attended Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, board meetings (I was asked to become a board member early in 1997), faculty meetings, and other events/activities on the school calendar (e.g., Fun Day in May, the Christmas program, and a special liturgy for the principal). A survey was sent home to parents in mid-October, 1996.

Description of Instrument and Results

The parent survey consisted of the following two questions: Why do you choose to send your child(ren) to Dayton Catholic Elementary? How many years have you had your child(ren) enrolled at Dayton Catholic Elementary? The survey also included this short introduction:

> As a member of the School of Education at the University of Dayton, I am interested in Catholic schools and what makes them unique. I am sending you this survey because I am especially interested in learning more about the special story at Dayton Catholic Elementary school. As parents of this school, your input is important (your name is not required so your response will remain anonymous). Please answer the following questions and return the survey to the school office by Friday. Thank you very much for your assistance.

There were 49 responses (a 26% return rate) to the survey which according to the school secretary is "not bad." The majority of the school parents did not know me and were under no obligation to complete the survey. Follow-up surveys were not sent out. Respondents have been associated with DCE from one to nine years with an average number of years for the respondents being 2.98. In light of the recent recruitment efforts these numbers were expected.

The surveys returned were very supportive of DCE. This should not be surprising. I do not mean to suggest that those parents not returning a survey would have made negative comments about the school, but rather that if parents took the time to complete and return the survey they were likely to be pleased with their DCE experience and therefore would make supportive, positive comments.

Many of the reasons parents gave for choosing DCE mirrored explanations found in the literature. The survey statements shared below are illustrations of the school's: sense of community; differences from the public schools; reputation for academic excellence; emphasis on values and the development of a faith community; and emphasis on discipline and order. The following statements are representative of many of the survey comments and, as the reader will note, many of the comments cut across several areas.

Parents choose to send their children to Dayton Catholic Elementary School because:

it is like a family.

from the moment that I first set foot at DCE, it felt comfortable. The atmosphere is that of a family. The teachers take an interest, a special interest in our son, pushing him to reach his fullest potential, caring about him enough to let him know that there are consequences when he is out of line. The staff works in concert with us, so that he's getting the same message at home and at school--study hard, work hard, have respect for other people, be responsible and take ownership for decisions and actions.

public school was not good for my daughter.

my child went to the public school for three years and could not read. The teachers had too many children in class to give my child what he needed. [Now] he is getting a good education, being taught to respect others. There is prayer in school and the environment is safe. The teachers care about his education and they encourage him to do his best.

I always wanted to send my son to private school, but thought I could not afford it. I don't like how the public school system is now. The children have no respect for the teachers and the teachers have no respect for the children. There is no discipline in public schools so the children are crossing lines in which to me it was getting scary to send my son to school. When we came to DCE it was like a family setting.

of the superior quality education, Christian based atmosphere, and strong discipline structure.

I was informed that this is an excellent school, and the school doesn't stand for any nonsense. The staff goes far beyond their duty.

DCE has a reputation for being an excellent school. We were looking for a school with good classroom structure.

we thought that by placing our child in a private school he would get the attention and discipline and education he needed.

> DCE has smaller classes, positive religion values, and I wanted to ensure that my son has a well rounded education.
>
> the quality of education appears to be higher than the average school. I attended a Catholic school and feel that my child is very academically challenged.
>
> teachers at DCE care and are concerned about the children's education. DCE teaches the children respect, responsibility and discipline. The material that is given to the children is explained thoroughly. I feel that my child can get a better education at DCE than in the public school. I feel that my child deserves the best education there is.

As is so often the case, analysis of data creates more questions than it often answers. In the following section I attempt to tease out some of the implications behind these parental comments.

Discussion and Implications

Cibulka and his colleagues (1982) commented:

> The market-problem for inner-city private schools, then, is to offer something of value so as to serve a perceived need . . . Private schools can address this problem by promulgating policies which foster either exclusiveness or distinctiveness. Exclusiveness amounts to the rejection of some pupils from a school. Distinctiveness, by contrast, is the cultivation of a different educational environment, which presumably leads to a different product. (p. 135)

Dayton Catholic Elementary is an example of a school which is distinctive without being exclusive.

Parents' reasons for enrolling their children at Dayton Catholic revolve around what they perceive to be the school's distinctives: smaller class size, teacher interest in students, emphasis on academic

standards, discipline and order, and attention to values and the sense of community. Interestingly, the availability of tuition aid did not appear to be a motivating factor for parents. When I queried the principal about this she responded that, "Tuition aid merely opens the door, but is not a determining factor for parents." This is especially interesting since 200 of the 250 students at the school receive some level of financial aid.

Another reason given by parents for choosing Dayton Catholic was the "smaller class size." Classes range in size from 19 students in the eighth grade to 32 in the first grade. With the exception of the sixth and the eighth grades, the class size is about 30 students. My classroom observations and educational training lead me to the opposite conclusion: I think classes at DCE are generally too large. Data also indicate that some of the public school classes are comparable in size to Dayton Catholic Elementary's, but others are significantly smaller. Dayton Catholic's principal suggested that perhaps the classroom structure and discipline may account for the perception that classes are smaller at DCE than in the public schools. This may be true, but further investigation with the parents is warranted.

DCE parents also cited the sense of community, the support they experience from teachers, the reinforcement of their family's values, and the emphasis on pride and respect instilled in the students. Convey (1992) summarized a study completed by Vitullo-Martin (1979) this way:

> Vitullo-Martin hypothesized that inner-city Catholic schools were effective because they: were more effective community

> organizations than were public schools; engaged the support and involvement of parents better than did public schools; reinforced the family's values and its view of the importance of education; and created a sense of pride in the students and parents because these schools were the products of parents' and teachers' efforts. (p. 23)

The effective school factors highlighted by Vitullo-Martin (1979, p.70-71) are not only perceived by Dayton Catholic's parental community, they are evidenced in school documents (i.e., the vision, mission, and belief statements).

Dayton Catholic Elementary School's mission statement says the school "will be recognized as the stabilizing anchor for the Wesleyan Hills neighborhood, providing quality spiritual, academic, and social training for the students attending the school." The vision statement states that the school "is dedicated to identifying the community resources necessary to guide students toward reaching their full potentials." And many of the parents' comments validate the following school belief statements. "We believe that: all students can learn; learning is a life-long activity; students learn best when students, families, and school work together; parish involvement is vital to the spiritual development of the school community; teachers are life-long learners; and the community offers valuable resources for student growth."

In summary, parents choose to send their children to Dayton Catholic Elementary for some of the same reasons that parents have chosen Catholic schools for decades. The consistency between the

school's mission and everyday classroom practice projects a powerful message to the school community. As McLaughlin (1996) points out, "shared clarity of educational vision is a well known general requirement for educational effectiveness" (p.137). Dayton Catholic Elementary's attention to mission in conjunction with the market issues has permitted it to remain a vital part of the local community. As the principal states in O'Keefe's Survey of Inner-City Catholic Elementary Schools (1995):

> We as Catholics must recognize the tremendous harvest available to us in the urban mission. We can make a tremendous difference in the lives of the children, their families, and the neighborhoods. We have a tremendous asset in place already when a school remains open in an urban area. . . We are very proud of our work. We must make certain that we can maintain our presence. (p. 12)

As urban Catholic elementary schools grapple with the market/mission dilemmas of their schools, they must begin to peer over the "traditional rim." As one teacher explained, "At Dayton Catholic we're over the traditional rim. We don't choose to teach in a Catholic school to teach Catholic students. We choose a Catholic school so we can teach a way of life. That's not how it's always been." I think her comments reflect the school's commitment to realizing its traditional mission by being sensitive to a new market. The school's responsiveness to family needs is a cornerstone of its distinctiveness. Responsiveness works best in a climate of mutual strength and commitment where parents and school officials bring clear expectations to the school and where these expectations are commonly adhered to. Responsiveness is not likely to

persist without a willingness by school personnel to respond positively to the needs and demands of parents and without a decision-making structure which encourages these needs and demands to be expressed. This kind of responsiveness creates a sense of common ownership of the school (Cibulka, et. al., 1982).

Dayton Catholic Elementary School may be "over the traditional rim," but it also is mindful of its mission and attentive to its market.

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